



U.S. Department of Justice

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Eastern District of Virginia

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, announced the arrest yesterday of Louay Habbal, age 45, a naturalized United States citizen from Syria, and resident of Vienna, Virginia, by special agents and task force officers from the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) assigned to the Annandale, Virginia, High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). Habbal is charged with operating Mena Exchange, an unlicensed money transmittal business located at his residence. He was arrested upon his arrival at Dulles International Airport on a flight from Damascus, Syria. Habbal appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge Liam O'Grady in U.S. District Court in Alexandria today and was released but required to wear an electronic monitoring device.

According to the indictment, Habbal received funds from customers nationwide and deposited those funds in bank accounts in Virginia and elsewhere. After taking a portion of these monies as a fee, Habbal then transferred the remaining funds to other entities for further transfer to individuals overseas who had been designated by his U.S. customers. In total, Habbal transferred or caused to be transferred through Mena Exchange more than \$23 million to Syria and elsewhere around the world from November 2001 to July 2004. ICE agents seized over \$100,000 from the company's bank accounts, and other assets.

Also according to the indictment, Habbal advertised his business through a website called MenaExchange.com. The website described Mena Exchange as a service provided by Mena First Capital, LLC, which transmitted funds between the United States, Middle East and North Africa.

Mr. McNulty stated, "Money is the lifeblood of terrorism and that is why we have made the prosecution of illegal money remitters a priority of this office. This case does not involve an allegation of terrorism financing, but stopping all improper money transfers may indeed deprive terrorists of financial support."

"ICE's goal is to identify, disrupt and dismantle underground financing and transmittal operations. This case demonstrates the threat posed by unlicensed money transmittal businesses. Any criminal or terrorist can come to these underground businesses and have their millions wired anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds with no questions asked," said ICE Special

Agent-in-Charge Allan Doody.

Also making this announcement is Allan J. Doody, Special Agent-in-Charge of ICE in Washington, D.C., and Leo J. Rossiter, Chief of Police for the Washington-Metropolitan Airport Authority.

This case was investigated by the Annandale HIDTA Money Laundering Initiative, an ICE-led group comprising of task force officers from the U.S. Secret Service; Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigations; FBI; Virginia State Police; Virginia Attorney General's Office; Metropolitan Police Department; Prince William, Arlington and Alexandria Police Departments; and the Metropolitan-Washington Airports Authority. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Steve Mellin and Special Assistant United States Attorney Jessica Lombardo.

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